

INCIDENT TYPE

by  
Michael Booe

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A collection of four short stories written during my two years in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins.

Advisor: Eric Puchner

Second Reader: James Arthur

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## **My Friend Elliot**

I'd expected Elliot himself to pick me up at the airport, but as soon as I passed through the security checkpoint a girl in a black business suit was waving and calling my name.

"Jesse! Jesse Cohen!" She was pretty well-put together, I have to admit, one of those type-A Stanford-educated go-getters. Kind of Eurasian looking, half-Japanese maybe. Or maybe Chinese. She was from Elliot's Institute, I guessed, and I wasn't wrong.

The girl shook my hand and introduced herself as Xena. I half-smiled, anticipating a joke, or at least an explanation, but it never came. "Elliot's been stuck in a meeting all afternoon," she continued, rolling her eyes in a you-know-how-it-is kind of way, although I didn't know how that was because I'd never in my life been stuck in a meeting. While we waited for my luggage, I wondered if Xena was going to want to carry my bag. I wasn't entirely clear on her position at the Institute; this seemed like a pretty menial task, picking me up, and the temptation was to assume she was some kind of gofer or even an intern, but then again Elliot was the head honcho, and I was his oldest friend in the world--maybe she was an executive assistant, or even his protege.

I tried to wheedle some information out of her. "What kind of work do you do?" I asked.

"Oh well," Xena said, half-distracted by something happening on her smartphone, "all kinds of things. The Institute is really contribution-focused and non-hierarchical, you know."

"Sure," I said.

I was so caught up mulling over the various permutations and possibilities that I almost missed my bag as it slid down the conveyor belt, only at the last minute leaping forward to grab

the carrying handle and nearly losing my balance in the process. Xena made to no move to help me; she just stood there with a polite half smile, and once I had my bag in hand she led me briskly out the doors to a silver Lexus which magically unlocked itself at her approach. I'd never seen anything like it--there wasn't even an ignition key, she just pressed a button on the dashboard and the car sprang to life. It was, I knew intuitively, Elliot's car.

She was somebody fairly important, I decided, if not officially then in fact.

Prior to the week before I hadn't spoken to Elliot in a long time. We'd been very close as kids. The relationship had been founded on the concept of mutual defense--Elliot's defense in particular. Unfortunately, Elliot, lacking many friends in his grade school days, had become a voracious reader, and as a result his vocabulary was quite a bit more extensive than that of our peers'; this, combined with his deep-seated inferiority complex resulted in many otherwise (relatively) non violent confrontations turning into fairly serious beatings. "That rube," he said to me once, after a particularly powerful seventh-grader named Tommy Trout had slammed Elliot's nose into a locker. "He probably doesn't even know what 'philistine' means." Then he laughed, like he'd won after all, had really had it over on Tommy.

In sixth grade I was the new kid; my father had moved the family around several times by the time I hit middle school, and as a result I'd developed a kind of clinical shyness. I found it almost impossible to talk to people I didn't know, and because I didn't know anyone I wound up not saying much at all. This meant I was a perfect match for Elliot, who was perfectly happy to have someone he could say things toward, and who would mostly nod in response.

The dynamic changed in high school. See, I'd always been, like Elliot, kind of a chubby

kid, but in the summer before ninth grade, I thinned out. I grew about five inches. I got, frankly, kind of hot, and I learned that fall, as girls turned around in their desks to whisper things to me during English, that appearance really does matter. I made friends, I got into music. I became, much to my own astonishment, kind of cool. None of these things happened to Elliot, who got bigger, but in every dimension. At 16, he looked remarkably like his 12 year old self, except with a heavier brow and a somewhat bigger gut. I tried wherever possible to include him in my social life, although none of my new friends cared much for him.

I want to emphasize that even as our paths diverged, we were very close. Maybe it was force of habit, or nostalgia, or loyalty, but we spent a lot of time together, just driving around, or lounging in crowded mall food courts, looking at girls. If anything, Elliot seemed to crave my attention even more in those days, sensing it had become a limited commodity, and that my companionship granted him a kind of limited but real social approval. And I liked listening to Elliot; he was capable of taking his own experiences and spinning off grand social theories. His failures with girls, for example, were subject to endless self-examination and theorizing--about the nature of females, about the nature of males, about the nature of Elliot, about sex, about the role of media in shaping desire, about God. It was clear he expected his present humiliations to be temporary, that a better world was waiting just over the horizon.

Elliot's big problem, I think, was that he desperately wanted to be a nerd, when in fact he was, and would always be, merely a dork. There were plenty of socially maladjusted, awkward, strange kids in school. But they mostly kept to themselves or, even more commonly, banded together to talk about Javascript or the upcoming Calc midterm. They got As. Elliot wasn't *stupid*--but he had to study to do well. And he often didn't study very hard. For months he

bragged about how “pedagogical” the SATs were (this was the other thing--he often used the wrong words, I believe in retrospect he meant “pedestrian”), but after he’d taken them he refused to tell me his score, claiming that aptitude tests were bunk and incapable of really measuring intelligence.

After high school, as most of us headed off to college, Elliot didn’t go anywhere. He claimed to have gotten into Harvard but told me he’d decided not to attend to “pursue the kinds of interests and subjects that really thrill me, that can really change the world.” For a long time I’d figured that was bunk, and occasionally I spared a pitying thought for poor Elliot, stuck back at home, his reach still exceeding his grasp, until a couple of years ago when I’d begun hearing strange whispers through the grapevine: Elliot was some kind of research scientist, he was working on an advanced spy project for the NSA, he was being bankrolled by a Silicon Valley billionaire. It was hard to separate out the truth, but a couple of months prior I’d committed to some fairly serious Internet research, and found, to my surprise, that the rumors weren’t far off the mark: Elliot was in fact the co-founder of something called the Synthetic Intelligence Planning Institute, a kind of think tank funded by a particular well-known Silicon Valley billionaire infamous for his bizarre Libertarian worldview.

The next day I’d emailed Elliot, out of the blue, telling him I was going to be in the Bay Area for a wedding and would he like to catch up after all these years. Elliot had written back almost immediately, inviting me to stay with him, to stay as long as I wanted, make a vacation of it. What I’d told him wasn’t entirely true: the friend’s wedding had happened over a year ago.

The fact was, I was needed money. For the last several years I’d managed to eke out an existence as a Internet musician with a modest but dedicated following on Youtube. But then

things had started to go bad. I broke up with my girlfriend, Kelly, with whom I'd collaborated on most of my songs. My numbers had begun to dwindle, the market become oversaturated with newer, younger musicians, boys with smooth skin and big hair. At 28, I was old. Over the last several months the experience of checking my bank account's balance had become increasingly surreal. The number dwindled from five digits to four, but in that time my life didn't change at all. It would be a sudden thing, I realized: I'd continue to pay rent and buy groceries and gas just like I'd always done, until one day I'd simply wouldn't. I had credit cards, of course, but without any income at all they wouldn't last me very long. The day I flew to see Elliot my bank account stood at \$467.43.

So I needed Elliot. Some kind of loan, I was thinking. The ebullient quality of his email had buoyed my spirits, as had the Lexus. It might be awkward, initially, I figured, but in the end he'd help me. After all, I was his oldest friend.

The Institute occupied the top floor of a low-rise building in a tasteful, anonymous office park. Inside were a bunch of youngish looking people in casual wear milling around the open floor office, gazing languidly at tablets or chatting quietly around plush-looking, brightly colored furniture. The vibe was casual, collegiate, nurturing, although the place seemed a little understaffed, the space a bit empty given its size. And no one seemed to be doing much work. But maybe it was just the end of the day.

"Wait here, I'll get..." Xena started, but before she could finish, there he was, striding across the office with his arms held wide and a goofy grin plastered across his face.

"Jesse!" He hadn't changed much. His face was still soft and round, although it now



sported a growth of curly black beard. He'd always been rotund, and now he was perhaps a bit rotunder, but he wore it reasonably well. He had on a black blazer and a pair of designer jeans. We shook hands and hugged, and made a lot of noises about how great it was to see the other and how we were both sorry we hadn't done this sooner.

Elliot declared that it was time to go to dinner. He turned to Xena. "Everything ready?" She handed him a briefcase, and he responded by putting his arm around her waist and planting a kiss on her lips. She giggled and pushed him away playfully. A few of the idle staffers glanced over and then away. As we headed out the door Elliot flashed me a grin and waggled his eyebrows in Xena's direction, like "you believe this?" I took this, also, as a good sign.

Elliot brought us to an upscale Japanese place where he seemed to be on a first name basis with all the staff. "Yoshi is a genius with the *masomoto*," Elliot had told us.

"Not to toot my own horn," he said, "but what we're doing is probably the most important work on the planet." Xena nodded earnestly. "And it's absolutely vital that we succeed." From what I could gather (and I wasn't always able to follow the explanation, there seemed to be a great deal of intentionally obfuscatory jargon), Elliot and his Institute believed that the development of powerful Artificial Intelligences was inevitable, but that their benevolence was not. It was of vital importance, therefore, that mankind ensure these entities have mankind's best interests at heart. "Otherwise, God only knows," Elliot said. "We could end up with an AI that decides the Earth would be better off as a thirteen trillion ton paperweight. And that's a best case scenario! That's utter indifference! If the AI were malicious..."

“It could create Hell on Earth,” Xena said grimly. “Literally.”

“Literal Hell on Earth. And believe me, a supergenius intellect capable of executing  $10^{28}$  operations per second could think up tortures that would make Dante look like Disneyland.”

“Disneyworld,” Xena said.

“Yeah,” Elliot said, “Disneyworld.”

“Like a Disneyworld but with torture. Tortureworld.”

“A lot of torture.”

“Wow,” I said. By then our sushi had arrived, and I was pushing around a spicy tuna roll in a pool of soy sauce. What Elliot was saying sounded prima facie crazy. Total kool-aid stuff. On the other hand, the Institute was a real place, with real people, people who looked like the staff at any up-and-coming Internet start-up. And the money was real: Elliot really was backed by some major players in the industry. If someone had told you in 1935 that within twenty years we’d have bombs capable of ending civilization on Earth, that would have sounded crazy too, right? “That’s a lot to think about,” I said.

“It’s all I think about,” Elliot said.

When Xena excused herself to use the restroom, Elliot leaned in conspiratorially and said, “What do you think?”

“Of Xena? She’s cute. What is she, like your secretary?”

Elliot frowned. “She’s an executive facilitator. The *Institute’s* executive facilitator.”

“She’s hot,” I said, worried I’d offended him.

“She is hot.” He lowered his voice. “The sex is unbelievable. Guess how many times

we have sex per day, on average.”

“Umm...”

“Come on. Guess.”

“Two?”

“Three point four. Of course the weekends raise the average quite a bit. And you’d be shocked at some of the things you can get up to in this city. It’s a very kinky town.”

When Xena returned, I managed to turn the conversation to myself, to my various tribulations in Los Angeles. I tried to present my circumstances as grim but not yet totally hopeless; I was only temporarily hobbled. This was merely a rough patch, albeit one that I might need assistance getting through, I hinted obliquely.

“What you need, of course, is Bayes’ Law.”

“Bayes’ Law?” I said.

Elliot and Xena exchanged knowing glances. “It’s the heart of our entire effort,” Elliot said. “The Institute is nothing if not Bayesian.” He began scribbling something on a napkin, which he then passed to me. On it he’d written:

$$P(A|B) = \frac{P(B|A) P(A)}{P(B)}.$$

It looked vaguely familiar, like something I hadn’t understood in a college statistics class. “I don’t get it.”

“It’s quite simple. This equation tells us how to calculate the probability of something,  $A$ ,

given the probability of a prior condition  $B$ .”

“Okay.”

“This is the basis of our entire philosophy,” Xena added. “Everything we do is governed by it. Everything.” This last bit was delivered with her staring straight into my eyes.

“Right,” Elliot said. I must have met that particular revelation with a blank look because after a moment Elliot said, “Say there’s a test for a rare disease which has a 99% accuracy--99% of the time it gives a true positive, 1% of the time it gives a false positive. Say you take the test and it says you have the disease. What’s the probability you actually have it?”

“Well,” I said, leaning back in my chair, thinking. I had never been very good at math. “99%?”

“Okay. Now imagine I tell you this disease is fairly rare, only one in 10,000 people has it. Does this change your answer?”

“No. I mean, the test is still 99% accurate right?”

Elliot and Xena exchanged glances again. “Think of it this way. If 10,000 people take the test, how many will get false positives?”

I had to think about that one. “About a hundred.”

“Right. And how many will get true positives, actually have the disease?”

“Well, one, I guess.”

Elliot smiled triumphantly. “So, even with a positive test result, the odds of you having the disease are still only about one in one hundred.”

“It’s all about priors, Jesse,” Xena said, reaching out and patting my hand for emphasis. “You must see to your priors.”

“It’s the basis of all rational thought. We believe that AI will be heavily rooted in Bayesian logic. But you must ensure your priors are as good as they can be. That is absolutely essential.”

I found myself thinking about Elliot’s hypothetical disease all through dinner. Something seemed wrong there, like there’d been some trick, mathematical or rhetorical, that had given a wrong answer. But try as I might I couldn’t fathom where the reasoning had gone bad.

We went back to Elliot’s apartment in the city. The place was huge, with a breathtaking view of downtown and the bay bridge beyond. Elliot produced several bottles of wine which we set to working through. We got pretty drunk. To my relief the conversation seemed to have turned permanently away from machine intelligence and weird probability formulas. Instead we talked about old times, about school, with a level of nostalgia that was wildly unjustified.

At some point Xena apologized and excused herself, explaining that she’d had a long week and had to be up early on Saturday. Elliot watched her slip into the bedroom.

I said, “Elliot.” I said, “Honestly, I’m in a bit of trouble, Elliot.”

Elliot nodded. “Yes, I figured. I took the liberty of looking at some of your Youtube metrics.”

“You...okay.”

“Things turned down significantly almost exactly a year ago, yes?”

He was right. Kelly and I had broken up a year ago, and she’d gone on to create her own channel, taking about 60% of my traffic with her. There were other reasons for my decline, of course. “Kids these days, their attention spans are shot. You know the top-selling musician on

iTunes last week is from Vine? They bought his music after hearing about five seconds of it. And probably spent about a half a minute listening to the song itself before they moved on to some other thing.”

“Mm,” Elliot said. I knew he didn’t share my outrage. He was a true--what? Technophile? One of the faithful. Certainly he’d have rejected out of hand the notion that progress could have an intrinsic downside. “What do you need, Jesse? Money?” I squirmed in my seat. It was exactly what I needed, but I couldn’t say it. Elliot went on without me. “Here’s what I think. Come work for me.”

“At the Institute?”

“Sure. In point of fact, we need a new social media manager. You have experience with that, selling yourself, selling your brand. Should be right up your alley.”

The idea of working for the Institute, whose purpose I barely understood, wasn’t an immediately appealing prospect. But I sensed Elliot wasn’t going to just give me a loan. He considered himself the paragon of rationality, and I doubted he’d see anything rational in that. What’s the point of a loan if you think the person isn’t going to pay it back?

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

“Think about it.”

“Thanks,” I added. “It’s a really generous offer.” I took a swig of wine. Nodding to the door, I said, “How long have you and Xena been together?”

Elliot sat back on the couch, a look of satisfaction moving across his face. “About a year. She’s very appealing to me. Hits all of my must-have qualities.”

“What’re those?” I said, instantly regretting the question.

“Well, of course she’s in the upper decile of intelligence. That’s my bare minimum, mind you, Xena is in the top 1% easily. She possesses a basically optimistic and rationalist view of the universe. She’s constantly examining her own logic and assumptions, and is able to change her mind in the light of new information. That’s critical, that’s the heart of Bayesian thinking.”

“She’s pretty hot,” I added helpfully.

“Physical appearance of course is very important in attraction and sexual chemistry. And I’ve always had a strong preference for the Eurasian phenotype. Luckily there are a lot of half-Asian girls in the Bay Area. And of course, she believes, as I do, in an unjealous, nonexclusive sexual partnership.”

“So you can sleep with other people.”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve both taken advantage of that perk?”

“Of course.”

I slapped him on the back. “Well, I always knew you could do it,” I said, which wasn’t entirely true.

“Do what?”

“I just mean--the girls weren’t exactly beating down your door in High School.”

“There was Lucy.”

“Lucy?” I said, frowning.

“Yeah, Lucy Flannel.” Elliot must have detected the confusion on my face because he went on. “We went out for six months. Our junior year.”

“Ohhh, sure,” I said. “Lucy, sure,” as if it had just slipped my mind. But it hadn’t. I remembered Lucy Flannel well enough, a goofy-looking girl with big glasses and unfashionably long brown hair. We’d been in the same Algebra II class. But Lucy and Elliot, together? I had no memory of it. It just wasn’t there. And I was pretty sure Elliot wasn’t making it up.

“Why did you guys break up anyway?” I ventured, hoping to bring the subject to a close, and hoping that the reason wouldn’t be so memorable as to render the question incriminating.

Elliot shrugged. “Oh, you know, teenage passions flag, even if she was the hottest piece of tail I’ve had to this day. I was very into Randian Objectivism at the time. Lucy was an incorrigible consequentialist. Of course now I see she had a point, even if her method of determining utility was hopelessly flawed. She’s a veterinarian in Spokane now,” he added, as if her vocation followed somehow from the fact of their breakup.

“You’re going to enjoy working at the Institute,” Elliot said. “It’s real work. The most important work.” He stood unsteadily, and drained the last of his wine. “Want to join us,” he said matter-of-factly, nodding toward the bedroom door.

It took me a moment to process the request. “Oh, um,” I sputtered. “That’s very generous. But I’m a little beat, honestly.”

Elliot nodded. “I understand. That’s a standing offer, incidentally. No one around here has much use for monogamy.”

I started at the Institute the following Monday. Elliot put me in charge of the Institute’s Facebook page, its Twitter account, and the forums on its website. Mostly the job involved moderating comments and posting links to AI related news, especially stuff like Stephen



Hawking saying he was, “somewhat concerned” about the “potential of self-aware systems to achieve geometric growth.” Once, after I tweeted a link to Terminator 2: Judgement Day on Netflix, Elliot said, “It’s not implausible. Skynet destroys mankind because we try to pull the plug on it. AI need not be malevolent to commit genocide.”

Admittedly, having Elliot as my boss wasn’t ideal. Actually, I hated it. For the most part he left me alone, but occasionally he’d saunter over to my desk (this was the other thing, the Institute’s office had an open plan, which meant I was practically elbow to elbow with 22 year old vlogger who told me her favorite band was Katy Perry, and across from a nervous looking intern named Chester who cringed whenever you spoke to him) and remind me about something--to post some press release about machine learning, etc. “Sure,” I’d say, affecting a smile. But it drove me nuts--who was he, fat, nerdy, sexless Elliot to be giving me orders? But of course Elliot wasn’t sexless anymore, and being nerdy was an asset. He was still fat though.

I found an apartment in Oakland, across the bay from the city. Elliot had brought up the three-way business again, but a few times I thought I’d caught Xena looking at me in that kind of assessing way women sometimes do. It made me wonder whose idea the three-way had originally been. Anyway, I was glad to be out of there.

One thing I learned about the tech elite, they had a lot of parties, many of thrown by disgustingly rich, disgustingly young executives at their mansions up and down the bay. Elliot seemed to know everyone, and the Institute ended up getting invited, en masse, as often as not. I never particularly enjoyed these parties, but I wound up going to them as often as not; I didn’t have any friends apart from Elliot, and the prospect of spending weekend nights alone in my

apartment filled me with a kind of dread.

Elliot always seemed to be in his element at these parties, and could usually be found holding court amidst a group of admiring hangers-on. What was it about his apocalyptic vision that attracted such interest, such attention? According to Elliot, we were definitely going to heaven or hell, and soon. And so maybe it was less the promise of the destination itself than the assurance simply that *something* was going to happen. We were bored, we were waiting.

About a month after I'd started working for Elliot, well into one of these parties, a party at which there'd been a waiter holding aloft a grid of tiny blue pills on a silver plate, I realized I was about to sleep with Xena. Had I been hitting on her all night? I cannot say that I hadn't been. I wasn't particularly drawn to Xena; I found her zealotry unsettling. But on that particular night, there was some allure, some gravity to her eyes, how huge and dark they seemed in the soft half-light of the party. Probably they'd just been dilated by the pills, but still.

"Do you want to go?" she was saying.

"Go?"

"To a room. A room."

My head was spinning. "Elliot?" I said. "Elliot."

"Don't worry about it. We're open. That's the way it is."

We found a room. Midway through, I think I said, "How many women at the Institute has Elliot slept with?"

"Christ," she said.

Afterward, I wanted to ask about Elliot. I wanted to ask if he was better than I was, if his dick was bigger (I couldn't imagine it was, but I wanted to hear it said). I didn't ask about any of

that stuff, though.

“I think about the singularity a lot,” Xena said after a while. I thought she’d fallen asleep; the room was so dark and the walls so thick that the sounds of the party were reduced to a low bass all around us. I might have been half asleep myself. “I mean, Elliot’s conception of it is essentially eschatological. And, of course, I believe there are grave dangers involved in any AI. But he’s got this idea that one day we’re going to wake up and everything’s going to be different. Do you know what that means, for everything to be different?”

I couldn’t tell if this was meant as a rhetorical question. “No?”

“It means that the past doesn’t matter. That what comes after isn’t about what came before. I guess I don’t think that’s possible.” I tried to think of something to say to that, but I couldn’t.

For a few weeks after I tried to make myself believe in the Institute’s mission, in its goal of ushering in the next age of mankind. I tried to be excited by the prospect of a good AI ending war and hunger, and I tried to be afraid of a bad AI trying to turn us all into paperclips or whatever. But I couldn’t do it. It all seemed--implausible wasn’t the right word. Maybe it was that, I had no way of knowing, but really it was something else. Like the whole point of the Institute was to get a good handle on the mind of God before He even existed yet. But wasn’t that the whole point of God, that He was unknowable? Anyway, I gave up the attempt pretty quickly. What I didn’t give up was sleeping with Xena; I knew it was a bad idea, but I didn’t stop. I never talked to Elliot about it, and when I asked Xena if she had, she’d give some unsettlingly non-committal answers. In theory, of course, it was all kosher, but I doubted it would be in practice.

Finally, late one Friday afternoon Elliot called me into his office. Most of the staff had already booked it for the weekend. I entered to find Elliot seated at his desk, fingers steeped in front of his face in a pose of deep concentration. Xena was standing just behind him, a tight smile on her face. I had a pretty good idea of what this was about.

“Have a seat, man,” Elliot said. I sat down. He had a little bowl of kale chips on his desk which he munched audibly as he talked. “Do you remember Becca Toosey?”

The question threw me for a loop. Becca Toosey. The image came to me slowly--a high school girl with a nice can. Not very smart. Worked at Baskin-Robbins. “Sure, Becca. I think we made out at somebody’s party senior year,” I added. She had pretty good tongue control, I suddenly remembered. I hadn’t thought about her in years.

“Yeah,” Elliot said quietly, sitting back in his chair. “You made out with her, despite knowing she was the love of my life.” He glanced nervously up at Xena. “At the time.”

I snorted. I felt bad but I couldn’t help it. “She wasn’t the love of your life man.”

“I *told* you I was in love with her.” It was all coming back to me now. I remembered a few of Elliot’s food court speeches in which he’d waxed rhapsodic about Becca--how she’d be the perfect partner because of how their intellects lined up, how her bubbly personality matched his ruthlessly rational one, how at the end of the day he was, inescapably, an ass man.

“That was just...” I struggled for words, for a way to explain to Elliot how stupid, how irrational, this all was, to be stuck on Becca Toosey (had he ever even talked to her outside of class?) ten years after the fact. But looking at him across the desk I knew it would be pointless. I raised my hands in surrender. “Look,” I said, “you and Becca would never have worked out.” I meant it as a joke, but no one laughed.

“Listen,” Elliot said, “I think maybe it would be best if you moved on. From the Institute.”

I looked at Xena, who was refusing to meet my eyes. I could have argued, or begged, and I’m pretty sure he would have taken me back, but I didn’t do any of those things. Instead I reached across the desk and shook his hand and said, “Thanks, Elliot. For helping me out.”

Elliot did offer me some freelance, remote work at the Institute, which I turned down, maybe a foolish decision in retrospect, but I was angry and proud and anyway I didn’t believe in it. Part of me wished I did. You could see by the way Elliot’s and Xena’s faces looked when they talked about AI that it was something powerful and real inside of them.

I went back to Los Angeles and by the end of the month I’d moved in with my mother in Simi Valley. From her backyard you could see the Ronald Reagan Library sitting on its chaparral hill. I was able to move out eventually, of course, my life wasn’t set on an inevitable downward spiral, and eventually settled pretty far north.

I haven’t spoken to Elliot in all the years since, although I think about him often. From what I can tell he’s still at the Institute, and so is Xena, and they’re still hoping to usher in the next era of mankind. And here’s the funny thing: I’m not certain they’re wrong. Like I said, I’m not a believer. But there are different levels of nonbelief. When a priest talks about heaven and hell, I *know*, in my guts, they’re wrong, that it’s superstitious crazy talk. So why is this different? Maybe it’s that Elliot’s religion hasn’t been undermined by centuries of skepticism. Maybe in a few hundred years this will all seem as ridiculous as Genesis seems to me now.

I’m not a believer. I don’t think it’s inevitable, or likely; I’m not even sure it’s possible.

But sometimes, on cloudless nights when you can see clear to the Santa Cruz Mountains, I'll imagine the peaks suddenly backlit, as if by a tremendous radiance burning from somewhere up the peninsula, and what I feel, or imagine I'll feel, isn't fear, or at least it isn't only fear, it's something like awe, wonder, joy, even though I know it won't be good news for us when it happens.

**Jane Reed**  
**(Quiet Girl #7)**

When Jane Reed moves to town and shows up in Mr. Osborne's first period English and Media class, three weeks before the Eighth Grade Winter Dance, we are not sure what to make of her. Mr. Osborne has her get up in front of the class and tell us where she's from and why she moved. These minor biographical details are irrelevant to us. We don't care where she's from. We don't care why she moved. Our one question: where does she fit in? We care for selfish reasons, yes, because who Jane is affects us all. But we also care, I think, because of empathy, because we don't want to look at Jane and see another bit player, another girl lingering in the background while the brighter personalities bask in glory and attention. That said, everyone benefits from fame. A popular kid brings more attention to Gardner and thereby to each of us. Our teachers tell us, "You're all in this together." Mr. Osborne likes to say, "A rising tide lifts all boats." This is basically correct, although it fails to account for envy, and who hasn't watched a kid like Jimmy Sabine and wanted it, the blazing hot light of attention, the invisible halo that to our eyes transfigures him. It's curiosity as much as anything else, to know the touch of the divine. We are all convinced it must be purely good, like sex (another bright mystery), we imagine, but better. Jimmy has, also, incidentally, done it with two different girls.

To determine who Jane is, we examine the intangibles, we read between the lines, we look steadily into her eyes and try to perceive the soul behind them. What we see is not terribly heartening: she is unremarkable looking, with long brown hair and a big forehead. Her fashion sense is competent but uninspired. In her soft, clipped responses to Mr. Osborne's questions she

reveals no discernable sense of humor, neither deep intelligence nor notable stupidity. She is, in other words, average but not particularly relatable, which is the worst thing you can be. The students exchange glances. My feelings about all of this are complicated by the fact that I am, ten minutes into class, powerfully in love with Jane Reed.

I cannot explain this. As I said, Jane appears to be a deeply unremarkable person. Perhaps it has to do with her freckles, which appear as a light dusting of brown flecks across her pale nose and cheeks. But other girls in the eighth grade have freckles and I am not in love with them. It is inexplicable. The tip of her nose wiggles up and down very slightly when she speaks. I love that her nose does this. Am I in love with her because of the nose, or do I find the nose beautiful because I am in love with her?

This could be a serious problem. I am, at present, not terribly popular, although I have ambitions and would desperately like to expand my media presence. I imagine myself as the steady, slightly laconic cool guy everyone goes to with their problems. A stable girlfriend could be a part of that image. But what does Jane bring to the table? Nothing, as far as I can tell.

Mr. Osborne asks Jane what she likes to do, and she says, "Dance."

Jimmy Sabine, from the back of the class, shouts, "Exotic dancing, hopefully!" A few kids chuckle, and Mr. Osborne whips his head around, the corners of his lips pulled down and his brow furrowed. But Mr. Osborne is in a bind, since Jimmy is our most favored son; he has one of the most popular streams in the county, and our school's mandate is to promote the growth and development of students' media presences. I want to shoot Jimmy a dirty look, but don't. Jimmy is far too powerful.

Some of us think that Jimmy's class clowning has increased markedly ever since the



legendary vlogger, Dao-Ming Jones, mentioned him during her daily channel roundup, and some hold that his commentary has taken on a forced, desperate, even pandering quality since he achieved his newfound popularity.

“His schtick these days is shamelessly targeted at sixth grade demos,” my friend Alex has argued.

Two weeks before the dance, I sit next to Jane at lunch. Jane usually sits alone. There was a group of girls she sometimes seemed to hover around, but I’d never seen her actually talk to any of them.

“Can I sit?” I ask, even though I’m already sitting. This hasn’t started well.

Jane looks up at me, and I’m afraid that she’s going to tell me I can’t. But after a long moment she turns back to her sandwich and says, “Sure.” Her attention seems to be focused very intently on the process of eating that sandwich. I notice that she eats in a very precise manner, taking small delicate bites in an orderly march across the face of the sandwich until its total length is slightly reduced. Then the process repeats again. I find this process incredibly charming, although I am aware that, given my feelings, I would probably find whatever eating method she used incredibly charming.

“So,” I say, “you dance?”

Jane chews slowly, her delicate jaw working a circular motion. “Are you going to make fun of me?”

“No, no!” I sputter. “I think it’s cool.”

“Why? You’ve never seen me.”

“I mean, in theory. I’m sure you’re a cool dancer.”

“Uh-huh.”

I have decided I am going to ask Jane to the dance. The Eighth Grade Winter Dance is our first real chance to build fanbases and get sponsorships and ad deals, our first opportunity to drop sick drama bombs or nasty iceburns, or for the few of us with talent for tragedy and comedy, both. So tons of media consultants and advertising people, along with agents and managers, always tune in to watch our streams, to see who’s cool and who’s watchable and who’s relatable and who’s going to generate the viewercounts.

I’d realized recently I would never be very good at dropping drama bombs: the guys who can do that are all tall and good-looking and already talented at sleeping with lots of girls (sleeping with somebody else’s girlfriend being the quintessential drama bomb)--I only found out oral sex is different from phone sex three months ago. So that’s out. And I’m not nearly funny enough to lay down burns, especially since you have to be kind of mean to do it consistently. In Media and Marketing, Ms. Smythe told us that we have to develop our core competencies. I figure my best bet is to go for a niche market: the steady guy with the pretty girlfriend you wouldn’t mind hanging out with. There’s an audience for that, definitely. Maybe an unremarkable Jane could fit into that identity. Although this may be wishful thinking brought on by my emotionally compromised state.

I ask Jane if she wants to go to the dance. Instantly, the speech-to-text parsers have applied tags like #guylikesgirl and #heartontheline to my stream, and just like that a couple dozen people log onto my channel, waiting to see what will happen.

Jane looks startled, her own stream is affixed with #whatwillshhesay and

#hopeshestotabitch, and probably has some viewers of her own.

“Um...” Jane says, “Well...” My stream’s viewcount jumps again, because things that go badly are always more popular than things that go well.

“Hey Lightman,” Jimmy Sabine says, slapping me on the back as he sits down next to Jane. His lunch tray is stacked with a dozen chocolate yogurt cups. “Man, the line took forever today! I was afraid they’d run out of yogurt!”

“Hey Jimmy,” I say, suddenly unable to look at either of them. What was going on? Were Jimmy and Jane going out? Were they having *sex*?

Jane looks at me. “Daniel and I were talking about the dance.”

“The dance!” Jimmy’s hazel eyes glitter. “That’s perfect! Come with us! I’ve got a whole group going. Plenty of girls. More chances to get lucky that way!” He laughs and spoons a massive helping of yogurt into his mouth.

A few minutes later Jimmy leaves to do his daily cafeteria podcast, which typically involves him bitching about Gardener’s lunch offerings for twenty minutes, followed by him singing the praises of Yoplait Extra Chocolate Chocolate Cups for five.

“So,” I say, “Jimmy, um, invited you to the dance?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you guys...”

“We’re not having sexual intercourse.”

I almost choke on one of Jimmy’s leftover yogurts. “Oh,” I say. “Well. That’s. Okay?”

“I live really close to the hotel where they’re having the dance. You can pick me up at my house and we can walk over. You know, if you want.” My heart leaps.

Jane answers the door when I ring. Her parents are nowhere in sight, which is fine by me. Her dress is powder blue and her brown hair is pulled up high, two strands of which fall down and framing her face. She looks perfect. When I slip the corsage on her wrist, #d'awwww flashes up and floats away, and I get my first ever micro-payment: Cutecorsages.com drops forty cents into my account.

The dance is held in a big conference hall at a Marriott downtown. It's already crowded when Jane and I enter. We find Jimmy and the group at the center of the hall. Jimmy throws up his hands excitedly when he sees us, embracing us both in a massive hug.

"You guys look great. Especially Jane." He winks at Jane, who just sort of looks at him blankly. Jimmy introduces us around the group, which is pretty much every cool kids in the eighth grade. They smile politely but don't seem very interested in either of us. I wonder, not for the first time, why Jimmy wanted us in his group.

Later, I find Alex and a few of our friends huddled in a corner near the bathrooms.

"See those girls over there?" Alex says, gesturing at a small group at the other end of the hall who look like they're wearing thong bikinis, bright red platform shoes, and nothing else. "Smart," Alex says, shaking his head. "#scantilyclad and #whatisthecountrycomingto are exploding. Two birds with one stone. Those girls are made." Alex glances at Jane. "So. Jimmy invited both of you to come with his group? Why?"

"I don't know," I admit. Jane shrugs and looks at her shoes.

Alex strokes his chin. "He's got a plan. Some angle. He must. He always does."

Jane looks pretty uncomfortable, so I ask her if she wants to dance and we go out onto the main floor. At first the songs are fast, so we just sort of wiggle our hips and wave our arms

around, and it's pretty fun--so fun that for a little while I even forget to check my viewcount.

After a while, the lights dim and the slow music starts, so I put my arms around Jane and we dance close together. In her heels, she's almost a foot taller than me, but I don't mind.

"I'm glad I came," Jane says.

"Me too," I say.

"I wasn't going to. You know, until Jimmy asked. Even then I wasn't really sure."

This surprises me. "Aren't you worried about sponsorships and endorsements and stuff?" My viewcount drops by a few points--even though streaming monetization is the basis for our entire economy, it's not considered a topic of interest. But it's true: I'm pretty sure the only kids who haven't come to the dance are Lucy Williams, whose parents are Jehova's Witnesses, and Carlo Medina, who says he's a communist. I wonder if this would be a good time to kiss Jane. I'd have to crane my neck back a bit to do it.

"Do you like me?" Jane says.

"Well, yeah," I say. "Of course. That's why I asked you out."

We're quiet for a while as the song plays. My approval rating is very high.

A few minutes later I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Mind if I cut in, pal?" Jimmy sweeps forward, and before I can respond he has a hand on Jane's hip. Is Jane okay with this? But her face is unreadable, and after standing there awkwardly for a few seconds I retreat to the back of the hall with Alex. I try to keep an eye on Jane and Jimmy but lose them in the crowd.

"Jimmy horn in on your action?" Alex says. I don't respond. Should I have stopped

him? “Maybe he just wants to do Jane.” Alex can be a little insensitive at times. But maybe he’s right. Three more slow songs play. I sip punch while Alex studies viewer metrics and advertising revenues. Overall, he says, the dance is going well.

I still can’t spot Jane, and I’m getting ready to go find her when Alex nudges me and points at the dance floor. “Might want to do something about that, dude.” Jimmy has his hands all over Jane, who’s turning her head away, her hands pushing against his shoulders. But he yanks her back in and holds her close.

“Hey!” I shout, already moving towards them. “Dude!” The music seems louder than it was before, and I can barely hear myself, but Jimmy sees me and grins. Jane pulls away from him.

“Dude,” Jimmy says. “What’s up?”

“What the Hell?” I say.

“Hey, hey, don’t get excited bro. We’re just having fun. It’s a free country, dude, she’s not your girlfriend.”

“What the *Hell!*” I’m not very articulate in emotional situations.

“Hey, she likes it. Doesn’t she?” He grabs Jane’s hand and moves it perilously close to his crotch. Jane yelps, disgusted, but he’s way too strong. I give Jimmy a short, sharp shove. He lets go of Jane’s hand and stumbles back. Jimmy’s eyes glitter.

“Are you coming at me bro?”

“Uh, I guess?” By now the dancing in our immediate vicinity has stopped as everyone turns to watch the unfolding spectacle. My viewcount is rising sharply. People are starting to bet on the outcome.

Jimmy steps forward and pushes me in the shoulder. It's not a very hard push, but it pisses me off. I look into his stupid, smug face and think about how rich he is, how popular. I get it, finally, and I know what I have to do. I shove him back, harder this time, but not hard enough to cause what happens next: Jimmy's feet kick out from under him, and he goes flying, arms flailing in the air, until he smashes into the the punch bowl (which I don't remember being that close a moment ago). The bowl flips through the air and lands upside down on Jimmy's head.

Two of Jimmy's friends materialize from nowhere and help him to his feet. The punch bowl is still sitting on his head. "This isn't over, Lightman. It's not over bro!" He moves towards me, but Jimmy's friends restrain him and hustle him away. He screams curses at me from over his shoulder. I look over at Jane. Her eyes are wide and her mouth agape. My viewcount is ten times higher than it has ever been before. #arealhero is being thrown around liberally. I look down, and see that a little of the punch has gotten on my suit. I grab a napkin and start dabbing.

The stuff that usually happens at dances happens. There's are another fights, apparently over a girl. Someone announces that the punch has been spiked, which prompts a flurry of activity as we try to drink the punch before it's carted away. The punch is then spiked again, and there's an announcement, and a flurry, and a carting away. This happens three more times, and we try to maintain our enthusiasm and exuberance, but it becomes difficult.

The music fades and there's activity on the raised stage at the front of the hall. As per usual for the Winter Dance, they bring on some entertainment: one of the kids with a comedy stream gets up and tells jokes. Another group, a band, plays songs. No one is paying much

attention to them. We are all waiting for Marzipan.

At last, David Cuza, a seventh grader, comes onstage, but our gazes are all fixed on the cream colored pet kennel tucked under his right arm. David placed the kennel down gingerly and undoes the latch. The door swings open portentously. It's too dark to see the interior, but I feel every body in the auditorium, myself included, straining forward, trying to peer inside.

A face emerges from the darkness, then a body. Marzipan. Marzipan, the most famous cat in the time zone, maybe the country, maybe the universe. Over six billion channel views. A three year old Scottish Fold with amber eyes, unusually fluffy. It is said that when Marzipan meows, markets shudder. Marzipan, whose endorsement of Iams created a monopoly overnight.

David lays out some boxes and padded posts for Marzipan, but she doesn't seem very interested. She swivels her head to stare out at the crowd, and everyone gasps. Each step is met with a moment of whispered wonder. Marzipan, of course, does not need to prove anything to anyone. David has graciously allowed a free Marzipan performance; under normal circumstances, Marzipan is only viewed in person by small groups of five or six people at a time, and tickets cost several hundred dollars.

Soft atonal music plays, the usual accompaniment to Marzipan's videos. Then Marzipan (who must have been outfitted with a tiny mic, I realize) meows. The crowd goes crazy. A few kids cheer and wave their arms above their heads. Marzipan meows again, and the crowd goes even crazier. I see tears streaming down a few faces.

The moment of rapture: Marzipan saunters over to one of the cardboard boxes, studies it for a moment, and jumps inside. Bedlam now. The sound of several hundred people screaming at the tops of their lungs. Someone throws a chair at the stage, which Marzipan nimbly avoids.



I am now concerned for my physical safety. The crowd surges suddenly, threatening to overrun the stage, and I lose sight of Jane in the press. Some of the kids have picked up plastic folding chairs and are swinging them around above their heads. A few are rending their clothes. I wonder if Jimmy is still here or if he's left. David picks up his cat and clutches her to his chest, and a trio of beefy looking guys darts out of the audience to form a protective phalanx around the pair; they must be Marzipan's bodyguards. Some isolated fist fights are erupting around the edge of the crowd. Someone has lit a fire in a trash can. I am maybe now the only one still paying some attention to the cat on stage. Suddenly, Marzipan slips out of David's arms and dashes toward an open window on the right side of the auditorium, ten feet off the ground, to which she ascends with a single powerful leap and vanishes into the night. David watches this in stunned silence. The guards glance at each other, ashamed, although who can protect a cat from itself?

My viewcount, everyone's viewcount, surely, is through the roof, as the crowd grows more and more violent, as people all over the world tune in to watch the destruction. Where's Jane? She may be in danger, I realize. I know what I'm expected to do, now. There really is no choice here. I silently thank Jimmy for all he's done for me, even if he didn't do it for my benefit. The villain is always more popular than the hero. But the hero isn't a bad thing to be. I steel myself and plunge into the crowd.

## **Nag Hammadi Changes Everything**

The mood at the national headquarters of BJ's Restaurant and Brewhouse is grim when Jim Marimow arrives that Monday. Lots of people aren't in their offices: MacReady in sales, Garcia in business development. Also absent is Epstein's assistant, Mary Joy, the little plastic saints stand in their orderly rows on the shelves along both legs of her cubicle, as always. Marimow hopes her absence isn't a permanent arrangement, but knows it probably is.

At the morning meeting Breckenridge looks like a news anchor on 9/11, white shirtsleeves rolled halfway up his forearms, tie slightly too loose in the collar, dark hair mussed. But Breckenridge is physically larger than any news anchor: he was a linebacker at USC, and his shoulders and thighs bulge obscenely beneath his shirt and slacks. Last month's sales data has just come in, Breckenridge explains as he paces back and forth at the front of the boardroom. The lights are turned low and the blinds are drawn, as though the projector were going to play a movie, but there isn't any movie. Just Breckenridge, his bifocals glinting in the half light.

It isn't looking good, he tells them. "We're facing massive cuts within six months, should these trends continue. Or accelerate. Also," he waves a big hand across the room, "we are becoming short handed." Breckenridge stops pacing. "What can be done?" Breckenridge says, and waits.

"The demographic shift of the past few months has fallen disproportionately onto our core clientele," Lee says. "Families in the second to low first quartile of income..."

Breckenridge slams a hand onto the the conference table. Marimow's coffee jumps in its cup. "That's *known*! That's been clear from the beginning. The question is how can they be stopped."

“Strictly speaking, sir, it’s not suicide. I think that’s an important distinction,” Childs says.

Breckenridge at last sits in his enormous chair at the end of the table. His eyes are dimly visible behind the glasses now, two small shiny rocks. “It *is* suicide Childs, make no mistake. This world,” he says, running his hands down the cool lacquer tabletop, “is the only world. And it belongs to us. There is nothing else. Those people are dead. They chose oblivion and not our delicious Feeds Five Double Pizza Tuesday Deal. Silence, and not Happy Hour Every Hour. The dichotomy here is not to be understood as a jape. We must convince them.”

No one says anything. Breckenridge gestures at Marimow. “I want to see something new by the end of the month. In-house. Ours. Bring back the flock.”

After the meeting breaks up Breckenridge takes Marimow aside and puts a hand on his shoulder. He towers over Marimow. “I believe,” he says, “our campaign will have to fundamentally one of spirit.” Then Marimow’s allowed to leave. He doesn’t really have any idea what Breckenridge is talking about.

He’s been afraid the responsibility might finally fall on marketing. Since BJ’s started turned over the entirety of its marketing efforts to an outside contractor, Marimow’s job has been mostly liasional. He hasn’t done creative work in a long time. Marimow heads back to his office and summons his team.

In 1945, an Arab farmer named Muhammad al-Samman was tilling his field at Nag Hammadi, a town on the southern Nile, when his mattock struck something hard in the topsoil. Expecting to find a stone or root, al-Samman instead uncovered a clay jar almost three feet high

and a foot in diameter at its widest point. Inside the jar were thirteen leather-bound papyrus books. The documents looked ancient. Al-Samman understood immediately that what he'd found might be valuable. Carefully returning the pages to the jar, he hurried home, where he summoned his brothers and told them about his discovery. He also informed them that earlier that day he'd discovered one Ahmed Isma'il was staying in town. The brothers had sworn a blood oath against Isma'il, whom they accused of having murdered their father in a land dispute the previous winter. The brothers departed, leaving the documents in the care of their mother. After the brothers killed Isma'il by, al-Samman later claimed, ripping out his heart and devouring it among them, they returned home, only to find their mother burning the papyrus books in the oven. Al-Samman quickly pushed her aside, but several of the manuscripts had been burned beyond recovery. She'd feared the evil eye, she told her sons.

Eventually, the surviving pages, which became known as the Nag Hammadi library, made their way into the hands of a rare book dealer, and from there to the Coptic Museum in Cairo, where they came to the attention of European scholars, who began the painstaking process of translation from the original Coptic. The documents were diverse, but they all dated from the 3rd or 4th century AD, and they described a kind of Christianity very different from the dogma that was then taking shape in the cities of the failing Roman Empire. The faith described was essentially gnostic--they held that the god described in the Old Testament was not the true God but a pretender, a demiurge who'd fashioned the material universe but not the spirit, and that human souls longed to return to the true God but were trapped in their mortal bodies by the demiurge and his archons, giants who were sent to earth to keep mankind in check. They claimed that Christ was the incarnation of the true God, incarnated into the mortal world to teach

the prisoners how to escape.

This was all a matter of public record. The translations had been available since the 60s. What had only become known when it appeared online a few months before the morning meeting with Breckenridge, however, was that a tiny fragment of the papyrus al-Samman's mother burned had survived. This lost gospel was uploaded by parties unknown along with a translation into forty languages. Upon reading the short passage, the hapless or lucky reader (depending on your theology) blinked out of the world. Simply stopped existing.

For obvious reasons, the text should have been slow to go viral, except it soon became clear that: 1) some unknown but significant parties were interested in seeing it spread, 2) something like 0.5% of people were immune to the effects of the text, and could therefore safely pass it along through speech or writing, 3) it was fairly easy to copy/paste the passage without actually reading it, and 4) for reasons no one could explain, Taylor Swift had tweeted a link to the original upload seventeen minutes after it first appeared online. The FBI had attempted to interrogate her hours after the crisis began, but by then she was nowhere to be found.

Marimow spends the evening with his girlfriend Charlotte at her house. Her feet are propped up in his lap as they watch a reality television show recap. Charlotte is Marimow's dentist--that was how they met.

"We should watch something else," Charlotte says. "How did we let it come to this? We're watching people from the show talk about the show we just watched."

"I'll change it," Marimow says. The remote is just beyond the maximum reach of his arm on the coffee table. In order to get it he'd have to bend his torso slightly forward. He

doesn't bend his torso.

"I wonder how much of the economy is driven by our collective inability to change the channel." This is one of Charlotte's more unpleasant qualities: her tendency to become morose and ruminative, especially late at night. A favorite obsession of hers is the possibility that the world exists on a very delicate arrangement of assumptions and unspoken agreements whose tiniest disruption might bring about apocalypse. The recent gnostic crisis hasn't much improved her outlook.

Avery, Charlotte's 15 year old daughter, comes through the front door. Charlotte's eyes flash to the digital clock on the cable box. "It's 8:57," she says.

"So?" Avery says.

"Your curfew's at 9:00."

"Yeah."

"It's almost 9:00."

"But it's not," Avery says through clenched teeth, "mother. That's the nature of a deadline. There are no shades of gray here."

"I'm just worried about you, Aves," Charlotte says, and she holds her arms out while Avery stares at her until, realizing her mother will never relent, she dutifully leans in and accepts Charlotte's embrace. "Are you being safe?" Safe means only visiting websites submitting to the NSA's new screening processes. Safe means not opening strange emails, means memorizing the first eight words (and not a single one more) of the lost gospel.

"I am," Avery says quietly, "of course."

“In a sense what we’re doing isn’t any different from any other campaign,” Mueller is saying. “We just have to convince people to do the thing that we want them to do to the exclusion of their other options. So, in this case, eat at BJ’s and don’t attempt to transcend the material plane.

“That’s not what modern advertising is, Mueller,” van Dyne says. “It’s all about identification now. We have to inculcate a sense in the consumer that their aspirational selves are *already* eating at BJ’s, and they’re going to miss the train if they don’t grab some spicy chicken wings for \$4.99 a bucket.”

Marimow clears his throat. “So, really, the question comes back to: why are our target demographics so eager to vaporize themselves?”

Van Dyne shrugged. “That’s not what this is.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know,” van Dyne says, stretching his arms above his head, his fingers splayed toward the ceiling. “They’re sick of the rat race. Late stage capitalism has not turned out to be the barrel of laughs they were hoping for. Who doesn’t want to meet God?”

“I don’t think there’s any deep ideological component,” Mueller says. “It’s like, if you tell someone to stop thinking about an elephant. The groups in question just have more universal Internet access than the poors and more free time than the professional class. I mean, I’m curious. I’ve thought about it.”

Van Dyne nods. “Who hasn’t?”

“I haven’t,” Marimow says.

“No?” van Dyne’s eyes glitter. “Life’s just too fun, eh?”

“It wouldn’t solve anything.”

“I think it would probably solve quite a few things, actually.”

“I mean it wouldn’t solve anything for BJ’s,” Marimow says.

A few days later, on a Saturday, someone comes back. Her name is Sarah Wainwright, twenty, a resident of Elkhorn, Nebraska, a suburb of Omaha. She’d gotten in touch with a local news anchor, Jack Fowler, a few days ago, and insisted on being interviewed only by him. The national outlets jumped on the story immediately. Charlotte has been glued to the television all day. Marimow watches intermittently as he moves meat between the kitchen and the grill in the backyard.

“Obviously,” the ABC weekend anchor is saying, “we’re still investigating, but what we can tell you is: her story checks out. Sarah Wainwright, from what we can tell right now, and we do want to caution that the story is still unfolding, we don’t want to say anything definitively yet, but as far something like this can be proven, is the real deal.”

They’re showing clips from the interview, which took place in the living room of the modest split-level Sarah shares with her mother and younger brother. Or had shared, and was now sharing again. The space is cluttered but not in a way that suggests neglect or filth--it’s homey.

“People will want to know: why have you come back?” Jack Fowler says.

Sarah Wainwright’s eyes shine. “I came back, was asked to come back, to tell everyone the good news, that’s all,” she says. “That, you know, the Kingdom of Heaven is real, and He’s waiting for all of us.”



A graphic appears on-screen, allegedly of Sarah pre- and post- meeting God. The changes are distinct but not radical: her skin seems to have cleared up and she is smiling brightly in the photo on the right. It looks like an advertisement for a day spa.

“I think the big question we all have, Sarah, is: what’s heaven like?”

Sarah smiles guilelessly. “Have you ever been to Disneyland Jack?”

“Can you believe this?” Charlotte says, her eyes fixed on the screen.

“No,” Marimow says. “It’s pretty unbelievable.”

Avery joins them for dinner. She seems cheerier than usual, the surliness to which Marimow has grown accustomed replaced by a genial solicitude. She asks for extra helpings of mashed potatoes. She compliments Marimow on the quality and texture of the burgers.

“I saw that interview with the girl who came back,” Avery says, flattening a fluffy white crest of mashed potato with her fork.

“That girl’s a fraud,” Charlotte says sharply. “A huckster.”

“She seemed really happy. Did you know she used to be addicted to Xanax? And now they can’t find a trace of it inside her.”

“It’s a hoax, Avery. That girl is sick. She just wants attention. What she’s doing is sick.”

Avery looks at Marimow. “What do you think?”

Marimow is surprised. Avery has never evinced any interest in his opinions before, never sought him out for advice or guidance. In general he assumes Avery spends about as much time thinking about him as Marimow himself spends thinking about the internal politics of Kyrgyzstan.

“I think your mother’s right,” Marimow says.

Avery sighs. “That’s what I figured,” she says, and returns to her mashed potatoes.

Breckenridge calls Marimow into his offices the next day. His offices occupy the top floor of the building; it’s said Breckenridge also lives up here, which seems entirely possible, since only half the floor is accessible; the entire southern wing lies behind a set of locked double doors at the other end of the elevator. The walls are black wood with gold inlays. Light bulbs burn in bronze torches set along the walls. Breckenridge’s office itself has a huge rose window mounted behind the desk across from the door.

Breckenridge’s hulking frame is silhouetted against the window and the blue sky beyond; his features are somewhat difficult to make out. The distance between the two men is made massive by the width of the desk which is completely bare of any kind of electronic device or paperwork. It is unclear to Marimow how anything can actually be accomplished here. A cigar smolders in Breckenridge’s right hand. Breckenridge isn’t saying much of anything, just lifting the cigar to his mouth every now and then.

Finally he speaks. He asks Marimow how his work is progressing.

“Fine,” Marimow says too quickly. “It’s going well. Excited to show you what we’ve got.”

Breckenridge puffs on the cigar. “Don’t bullshit me son. I can tell when you’re prevaricating.” Marimow doesn’t know what to say to that, so he doesn’t say anything. “This is spiritual warfare, you understand that,” Breckenridge says.

“Yes sir, I think so.”

“Your devotion to BJ’s Restaurant and Brewhouse is a thing to be admired, Jim. I’ll not gainsay it. You’re a thirty year man, correct? But understand this goes way beyond tasty handcrafted crispy jalapeno burgers. Beyond even our delicious new gluten-free herb infused thin crust pepperoni pizza. We are in a liminal age. Is any of this getting through?”

“No sir.”

Breckenridge chuckles and blows a ring of smoke into the air.

Marimow gets a phone call at 1:00AM that night. It’s Avery, babbling and hysterical. Something to do with Charlotte, and although it’s hard to tell exactly what’s happened through the sobbing and screams, Marimow has a pretty good idea. He cradles the phone between his head and shoulder as he puts on his pants. He tells Avery he’s coming, that she should call 911 if she needs to. It’s only about ten minutes to Charlotte’s house if he hits mostly green lights.

When he pulls up to the house Avery is pacing robotically in the driveway. She’s barefoot, wearing a long t-shirt that falls to her knees.

“Did you call 911?” Avery shakes her head. Marimow heads toward the house, Avery following close behind.

“Her car’s still in the garage,” Avery says. They’re on the second floor, the door to the master bedroom halfway open. The television in there is on. From this angle Marimow can’t see it, but it sounds like some kind of infomercial for a machine that makes root beer floats.

“She’s not in there,” Avery whispers. “I was calling out for like ten minutes.”

“Okay,” Marimow says, also whispering. It’s not clear to him why they’re speaking this way but it seems appropriate. He takes a step into the bedroom, towards the laptop on

Charlotte's bed.

Avery gasps and grabs at his shirt. Marimow turns around; she looks terrified.

"I'll be careful," Marimow says. He gently takes her hand from his shirt. Avery is standing at the threshold, clutching her cellphone with both hands. She's staring at Marimow, as if her gaze can shackle him to existence, prevent him from blinking into nothingness. He rotates the laptop, lets his eyes creep slowly down the screen. You have to read the whole thing for it to work, apparently, but the passage is so short even a momentary slip can be fatal. He sees the words, "They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to him," and he slams the laptop shut.

He calls the police, and they send out a sallow looking detective in a rumpled shirt. Every police department in the country has at least one detective assigned to vanishment now. He speaks to Avery for a few minutes, then takes Marimow into the kitchen. Marimow gives him the rundown. The detective has a notepad on the table but he doesn't bother to write anything.

"We'll take the laptop to the station. We've got a guy who's, you know, immune. Not that I don't believe you, buddy. I've had five calls tonight. Must be the moon."

"There's, obviously..." Marimow starts. He hesitates. "Nothing you can do, right?"

The detective shoots Marimow a pitying glance. "Not unless we get a judge to issue a warrant for the kingdom of heaven. There have been a few cases where people staged stuff like this. Used it as a cover for running away, starting a new life. So, if you hear anything, let us know. Otherwise." He shrugs. "How long were you two seeing each other?"

"Almost three years."

"You want a psych referral?"

“No.”

“All right. I need to take care of the girl. She said she has some family up in Kern County?”

“Her grandparents.”

“Can you get in touch with them?”

“Yes.”

“Social services will be checking in shortly, in any case.” The detective tucks the notepad into his shirt. “Listen, buddy. If it’s any consolation, most of the time this thing’s spontaneous. Don’t read too much into it.”

Marimow finds the number for Charlotte’s parents. He’s not sure if he should call them right now, but in the end he does. He tells them everything. The grandfather, whose voice doesn’t betray much emotion, tells Marimow they’re on their way.

Marimow waits with Avery in the living room. She isn’t very interested in talking, so they just sit there in silence. At some point Marimow gets up and turns the light on, so they’re not sitting there in the dark when Avery’s grandparents show up. The grandfather is a short stocky guy with broad shoulders and a crewcut; his wife is simply diminutive. She’s wiping at her eyes with a handkerchief. Marimow feels uncomfortable; his only connection to these people no longer occupies this plane of existence.

The grandfather shakes Marimow’s hand and thanks him for helping out. It’s clear he’s being dismissed. Marimow says goodbye to Avery, who nods and doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t expect he’ll see her again, and he doesn’t.

Back home, Marimow isn't sleeping, obviously. Just as well. His presentation is tomorrow. He pulls up the powerpoint on his tablet. The cornerstone of the campaign is a minute long television advertisement. It will open with the members of a nuclear family going about the business of the day: Dad at an office, something that suggests both technical expertise and creativity, an architecture firm maybe; Wife also at an office, but something slightly less technical with a little more emotional labor, a consultancy firm perhaps; the kids, brother and sister, in school and team sports. It is important that they're all shown as very happy and self-actualized, even at this stage. But in the second half of the ad they come together at a BJ's as a family. And we look out and see that there are other families here, their shapes and sizes multifarious but all, undoubtedly families. Together they are a community. The slogan is, "Here. Together."

Marimow presses the heels of his hands into his forehead. There's something missing here. Spiritual warfare. He has to figure it out. He gets a beer from the fridge. He fiddles with the wording on some of the slides. Rearranging sentences like deckchairs. They need someone good to read those two words at the end. Donald Sutherland, maybe. Or even the son, Kiefer. Give it a bit of a kick, an edge. He gets another beer.

His mind is turning back, inexorably, to Charlotte. He is, so far, surprisingly unaffected, at least insofar as he doesn't have a strong inclination to wail or gnash his teeth or beat his fists against the wall. Not yet anyway: it is, certainly, the shock that has him now. But also the unreality of her absence--he doesn't know what has happened to her. Does mourning even apply here? It's more like she's skipped town without telling anyone. Which is, to be sure, very upsetting. But he's not sure she's dead. Breckenridge is sure, but Marimow is not.

More than anything he wants to know what moved Charlotte to read the words. Does it speak to some deep underlying dissatisfaction with her life, some failure on his part, on Avery's? That they weren't enough to keep her tethered to the world? Or, as is apparently the case in so many of these vanishings, was it a whim, a moment of fatal curiosity, like when you're standing on a high building looking down and there's a part of you, some perverse imp in the backs of your legs, that wants to send you over to meet the ground below. Except here there's reason to think maybe when you jump you don't fall down but up.

Marimow wonders if he were to read the forbidden gospel he'd gain the insight he needs. About Charlotte, about the campaign. He'll understand why what's happening is happening. He'll just read part of it. Not enough to send him wherever it sends you. He hunts around the Internet for a while until he finds a page plastered with warnings like, "Do NOT scroll down if you value your present corporeal existence!" The government has web crawlers running night and day, automatically deleting the forbidden text, but defeating them is relatively easy: even a simple image file, a picture of the text, is fairly difficult to identify. Marimow scrolls down slowly, until only the first line is visible. "They showed Jesus a gold coin and said to him". The whole thing is only 45 words apparently. Marimow wonders how many lines the passage occupies. He pulls the window down a little further. "'Caesar's agents are extracting taxes from us.'" This sounds familiar. He's pretty sure there's a parable like this in the Bible. The next line reads, "He said to them, 'Give unto Caesar the things'". Marimow takes a swig. He wonders what it feels like, what Charlotte felt. He wants to know. He has to see. He reads the final two lines: "that are Caesar's, give unto God the things that are God's, and give unto me that which is mine."

That's not how it goes in the Bible, he thinks. Then he thinks: I can still think. Nothing has happened. Unless heaven is identical to Marimow's kitchen. He reads the words again, looking for something, trying to understand. Although understanding is not supposed to be a prerequisite. He realizes how foolish his notion was anyway. No one knows what the words are until it's too late. That which is mine. The words do nothing to him.

The next day, Marimow stops by van Dyne's office, but he's not there. Mueller is also absent, but he's still on Earth; he's left a voicemail on Marimow's line saying he's got the flu. Marimow is thinking he's going to have to make the presentation solo when Breckenridge steps into the office. Breckenridge has never been seen below the eighth floor.

"Let's step out," Breckenridge says.

He drives the two of them to the nearest BJ's, which is located across from a Nordstrom's in a busy shopping center. The staff is clearly familiar with Breckenridge, and they usher them to a booth at the far end of the restaurant. At this hour the place is almost empty.

"Do you know how long it's been since I've eaten a non-BJ's based meal, Jim?" Breckenridge asks.

"No sir."

"Decades. I eat here three times a day, or I have meals delivered to me at my home or office. How often do you partake, son?"

"Not as often as I should, Mr. Breckenridge."

"Hmm. A politic answer. Well, do it more often. This place is a temple." The waiter brings them their drinks and a basket of bread. Breckenridge takes a hunk of bread and tears it



apart with his huge hands. “Tell me about the campaign.”

Marimow walks him through it, Breckenridge listening intently.

“Not bad,” he says, “not bad. I think, under different circumstances, we’d probably have gone with it.” Breckenridge has now eaten seven pieces of bread. Marimow is still working on his first. “But I’m afraid it’s a bit irrelevant now.”

“Irrelevant?”

“It’s become clear there’s no stopping this thing. We just have to let the fire burn itself out. The ramifications are apocalyptic, of course. We’ll probably lose about a third of the country. But BJ’s will be there on the other end of it.” He plunges a finger onto the tabletop. “We will endure.” He waves an arm across the restaurant. “Look. Hundreds of meal choices at affordable prices. A place for birthdays, little league celebrations. A place for working men at lunchtime, families in the evenings, even hung over teenagers in the early morning. And we provide tens of thousands of Americans good jobs with top notch healthcare options, including dental. The kingdom of heaven is right here. The only sin would be to abandon it half finished.”

“I read the lost gospel,” Marimow says. “I’m not sure why, but I did. And I’m still here.”

Breckenridge lays a hand on Marimow’s shoulder. “It’s all right, son. You’re only human after all. But look: you’ve been given a second chance. You’re still here. Now, let’s talk about your future at BJ’s.” Their waiter arrives, holding aloft two piping hot personal pan pizzas, one in each hand.

## **Incident Type**

**Incident Type:** Armed Robbery

**Date:** September 19

**Summary:** A University graduate student was walking on the 3600 block of Pinehome Avenue when he was approached by the suspect, who asked the student for the time. When the student told the suspect that he failed to see the relevance of the question, given the present state of things, the suspect produced from his jacket pocket a small brightly colored amphibian, which the suspect claimed was a “poisonous tree frog” of the South American type. The suspect further claimed that, unless the victim handed over all of his iodine pills, he, the suspect, would squeeze down on the frog with such force that the poison juices of the frog would squirt into the victim’s eyes/mucus membranes. The student gave the suspect all of his pills, at which point the suspect departed at a medium pace, somewhere between a power walk and a jog, heading north on Pinewood.

City police canvassed area to no result.

**Safety Tip:** Do not call a criminal’s bluff or do anything to escalate the situation.

Unless you are a trained herpetologist, assume any frogs, toads, or lizards used in the commission of a crime are venomous. Remember, there are always more iodine pills, but there’s only one of you!

**Incident Type:** Existential Dread

**Date:** September 24

**Summary:** A University freshman was walking between classes on campus when she

was suddenly overcome by the inescapable conviction that the entire world is actually a story about her best friend Lindsay, who is smarter, more attractive, and got into a higher ranked university in a state that necessitates requires fewer iodine supplements. The student was overwhelmed by the notion that, when she'd been a fairly close associate of Lindsay's in high school ("not best best friends, but definitely best friends") her life had in some mysterious but undeniable way been realer and more tangible, and that even mundane events, particularly those in Lindsay's presence, had had a kind of numinous quality that now, as the student's and Lindsay's lives drifted apart, seemed utterly absent from the her present life. Even eating and defecation had in some way been diminished. The student felt especially terrified that if she and Lindsay were to fall completely out of touch, she would cease to exist. This thought became so overwhelming that during her next class she was heard to exclaim, "We're just bit players in someone else's story! We're meat puppets!" (this was in response to the instructor asking the class if they preferred to submit papers in hard copy or electronically). The student was referred to University Psych Services.

**Safety Tip:** University can be a time of firsts for many students: they first time they're away from home, the first time they're in charge of their own study habits, or the first time they encounter the huge winged shapes we think were once housecats. Although this can be exciting, it can also be overwhelming and soul-shatteringly terrifying. Therefore we strongly encourage any students who are feeling depressed or anxious to seek out psychiatric services. Remember, Things Could Be Worse!

**Incident Type:** Mutant Pug Attack

**Date:** October 1

**Summary:** A group of six undergraduates was walking on the 5400 block of Ravenswood Lane when they heard a sound like a huge hog with a bad cold rooting through truffles. As they listened, this sound, which at first had seemed to originate from a single large creature, revealed itself to be really the amalgam of several hundred smaller, but still ill, hog sounds. They also perceived a stench like rotten fish. It was at this point that one of the students realized the danger, and shouted out, “Mutant Pug Attack!” but by then it was way too late. A swarm of mutant pugs turned the corner with the precision of a school of herring, and then they were upon the students.

Survivors were referred to psychiatric counseling; tactical units of the City Police locked down the area for several hours, but by then the pugs had presumably returned to their underground hive-nest.

**Safety Tip:** Pug attacks have been a serious issue all semester, and although the previous recommendation to always travel in groups, especially around dusk and in early morning hours, still holds, here are several additional tips to keep you Even Safer:

- By groups, we mean approximately 20-30 individuals.
- Carry melee weapons, particularly those that offer considerable reach (e.g. baseball bats, hockey sticks, shower rods, and where feasible, halberds).
- When you suspect a pug attack is imminent, group should form a defensive circle, facing outward, with individuals 2-3 feet apart and weaker members inside the perimeter of the circle. Pugs tend to target children, sickly, the elderly, etc.
- University is now offering additional physical education classes with an emphasis on

cardiovascular training.

**Incident Type:** Poor Choice of Major

**Date:** October 15

**Summary:** University Senior was in the midst of writing a paper on a Marxist interpretation of the depiction of sexual ethics in *Beverly Hills Chihuahua* (2008) when she was struck by the notion that her choice of major may have a negative impact on future career prospects. Student spent next several hours spent investigating whether it is possible to get a new undergraduate degree when you already have one, how hard it is to get into a good law school, and how long it takes to teach yourself computer programming. This was followed by long bout of self-recrimination, anxious vomiting, and quietly rocking back and forth in the corner of the room.

**Safety Tip:** Due to the spiraling cost of university education, it is recommend you choose a major likely to result in some amount of reimbursement for money invested. Several good choices likely to result in careers in highly remunerative fields include: biomedical engineering, computer science, electrical engineering, and mutant animal security. The world is a cold, uncaring place and the university system was created in a time when the cost of education was much lower and social signalling value of a degree in even a worthless field was much higher. Remember, after you leave here You're On Your Own!

**Incident Type:** Social Protest Melee

**Date:** October 16

**Summary:** A group students protesting in favor of more transparency in University policy vis-a-vis ongoing mutant attacks from an Anarcho-Syndicalist standpoint on McKeever Quad were confronted by another group of students protesting in favor of transparency in mutant policy from an Anarcho-Primitivist standpoint. The Anarcho-Syndicalists argued that they had received dispensation from University in order to hold their protest, to which the Anarcho-Primitivists responded by disavowing the capacity of any hierarchy to legitimately order human behavior. The Anarcho-Syndicalists expressed sympathy with this position, but held that because human beings are imperfect, and the world as it currently is “effed up,” in the words of the A.S. leader, certain temporary hierarchies were needed to bridge the gap between the present and the imminent communitarian paradise. Just as the two groups seemed on the verge of reaching an accord, a group of students from the Organization to Protect and Cherish Our Mutant Pugs (OPCOMP) arrived, and (loudly) began to proclaim the sanctity of all life, especially pug life, and inveighed against any university policy that would amount to genocide against them.

This resulted in a lengthy argument over the place of nonhuman intelligences in socialist communities. Eventually, the groups seemed to be on the verge of reaching a detente, when one of the Anarcho-Primitivists noticed suspicious rustling in a nearby bush. Fearing an ambush, the student reflexively lashed out at the bush with his shower rod (the rustling turned out to be a squirrel). The other groups panicked at the sight of the brandished weapon, and a wild melee ensued.

Several students suffered lacerations and broken bones before Campus and City Police units broke up the fight. At present no charges have been filed.

**Safety Tip:** Nerves are understably frayed following casualties suffered by student body

in recent weeks. However, this is no excuse for engaging in organized combat. Remember that group dynamics during times of high passion can be very volatile and confused. If you are in a group and believe that violence is imminent, do not hesitate to contact Campus Security. Remember, University and Municipal Authorities have a legitimate monopoly on violence!

**Incident Type:** Armed Robbery

**Date:** October 24

**Summary:** Non-affiliate was walking near campus on 4500 block of Benson Street when she was accosted by two masked suspects wielding lacrosse sticks. They demanded she hand over all of her iodine pills, as well as any smartphones, e-readers, or tablet devices. Non-affiliate complied with all demands, and then contacted City Police.

**Suspect Descriptions:**

1: W/M, 6'0", well built, early to mid 20s, well-coiffed hair with poofy front and shaved sides, smelled of Axe Body Spray

2: Same

City Police canvassed area to no result.

**Safety Tip:** Despite rumors to the contrary, we have no reason to believe that the suspects involved in this incident were University students. Remember, stick to well-lit areas, walk in groups, and avoid individuals brandishing potential melee weapons.

**Incident Type:** Spooky Visitation

**Date:** October 26

**Summary:** University undergraduate senior was awoken in early morning by the presence of wraith-like visitor standing over his bed. Student reported feeling “cold sense of dread,” as well as confusion, because the spectral intruder appeared to be his father, despite student’s father being very alive and, the student knew, at a businesses conference in San Diego.

When the student worked up the nerve to question the ghost’s identity, the spirit replied that he, the spirit, was the psychokinetic projection of the father’s (who was at present watching a dirty movie in his hotel room in San Diego the spirit told the student) upset at the student’s university achievements, or lack thereof. Why, the spirit wanted to know, did the student get a C in Organic Chemistry last semester? Was he stupid or just lazy? Why had he dropped Vector Calculus? Did the student want to end up working a soul-deadening job as mid-level manager at a regional toilet seat manufacturing concern as spirit’s own father had? Also, at this point the apparition’s head began to spin wildly on its neck and blue fire seemed to stream from its eyes.

The student was deeply upset by this, both the terrifying otherworldly display as well as his father’s more concrete recriminations. Student swore that he would do better, which seemed to mollify the ghost, who reminded the son that the world is basically a “dog eat dog” place, and that getting ahead sometimes involves stepping on other people’s shoulders/faces/necks. Ghost then dissolved into a fine green mist, at which point student contacted Campus Security Ectoplasmic Investigation Unit.

**Safety Tip:** Although ghosts and apparitions are usually physically harmless, their insights into family dynamics equips them to inflict severe emotional trauma. Whether ghosts are actually the subconscious manifestation of loved ones’ emotional states, or in fact the masks worn by extradimensional entities who have somehow gleaned insight into our deepest personal



secrets, it is recommended that you always agree with whatever a ghost says, and not attempt to debate or argue with them. Apparitions usually dissipate within 20 or 30 minutes, at which point students are advised to contact Campus Security.

**Incident Type:** Conquest of University Housing

**Date:** November 1

**Summary:** Although reports are still somewhat confused, it appears that the Sweetzer Hall dorm was seized last night by a group of undergraduate students espousing radical free market ideals. The students expelled the resident Campus Security Officer and barred the entrance to the dorm. The ringleaders then announced that Sweetzer would be selling large quantities of iodine pills at well above market value. City police attempted to lay siege to the hall, but were forced to abandon their positions by an ill-timed Mutant Pug swarm.

All students are advised to avoid Sweetzer Hall. Those students whose housing situations have been negatively impacted by this event should report to the Housing Office in Maynard.

**Safety Tip:** Although we understand that there have been significant iodine shortages due to theft and manufacturing slowdown, under no circumstances does the University condone dealing with insurgents and separatist factions. Buying these “blood iodine pills” is grounds for potential disciplinary action, including suspension or expulsion. Remember, our society is held together by only the barest of threads, and as Acting President of the Contiguous 48 States Forrestal has reiterated, Commoditizing Iodine Pills is a Major Threat to our Way of Life!

**Incident Type:** Certain Internships May Be Dangerous

**Date:** November 15

**Summary:** Campus Security has learned that certain internships being offered by Midfair Bioscience may be extremely hazardous to student health. One University undergraduate serving as a volunteer in Midfair's applied material sciences division was reportedly asked to walk through Bathgate Park, a recognized hotbed of Mutant Pug activity, in order to test a new anti-Pug repellent spray. Fortunately the student was unharmed. Although Midfair's actions, per the recent At Any Cost Act (US 194-201), do not appear to violate any laws, students are strongly discouraged from performing any actions which might bring them in contact with mutants, aberrations, extradimensional beings, etc.

**Safety Tip:** Internships are more important than ever for students hoping to secure future employment in competitive, high-demand fields. However, you should never agree to any action or activity which might result in permanent maiming or death. Here are some warning signs you should look out for when selecting an internship:

- You are asked to provide any relevant end-of-life/DNR orders.
- When you ask if any interns have gone on to permanent employment at the company, no one will make eye contact with you and the topic is quickly changed.
- One first day of internship you are provided with directions to nearest hospital and directions to nearest morgue.

**Incident Type:** Everything is going to be OK

**Date:** December 9

**Summary:** As students prepare for Winter Break, Campus Security would like to

reiterate that, despite our current travails, everything is going to be OK. Even now, things are looking up; the Marine Corps has recently determined that Mutant Pugs may have some application as shock elements in amphibious operations, and has therefore contracted to have most of the local hive-nests rounded up for trials.

Also, the leaders of the Sweetzer Hall insurrection recently announced that the entire insurgency was actually a senior thesis project investigating the effect of artificial shortages on critical supplies during times of crisis. Although the University cannot endorse such action, we are pleased by the leadership qualities demonstrated by these students; several have reportedly accepted offers from Goldman Sachs, McKinsey, and the Thule Society.

As you take your final examinations and reflect on another semester gone by, remember that safety is our collective responsibility, and that, working together, we can build a university, and indeed a community, that protects all of its members from the wickedness of the world.

Happy Holidays!

**Safety Tip:** Remember that certain varieties of pine tree have in recent months displayed some sentient qualities, and that attempts to cut down, or even to transport already cut trees, have resulted in violent retaliation. Consider artificial alternatives!

Michael Booe was born in Orange County, California on February 12, 1986. He holds an undergraduate degree in History from Stanford University. He counts among his literary influences George Saunders, David Foster Wallace, and Frank Herbert.